

May 29, 2013

Rep. Doyle: Change would reduce hiring options

We all know that double dipping your food is bad. Kids are told by their parents not to double dip their chips in the salsa and then there is the classic Seinfeld episode. But right now, the Wisconsin Legislature is not discussing the merits of whether or not a carrot can be dipped in ranch dressing more than once. We are talking about a different kind of issue: retired public employees like teachers who return to the classroom and help save school districts money.

Here in Wisconsin, all retired state employees receive an annuity. These are their retirement benefits administered by the Wisconsin Retirement System (WRS). After a 30 day break-in-service requirement, these retirees are allowed to return to public employment. At this point they are given a choice, give up their retirement until they retire again or continue to receive their annuity and work without benefits. For a lot of people, the latter is a very appealing option.

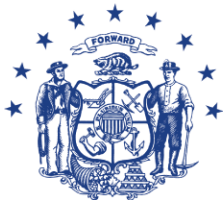
This ability to rehire a retired employee without having to provide benefits has been beneficial for our school districts, especially the rural ones. Unfortunately because of last year's budget cuts, districts are struggling to find qualified employees who are willing to work for less. If a teacher from a larger district in Milwaukee retires to the La Crosse area and then decides to go back to work, our districts can hire them as a part-time replacement without having to worry about providing health insurance, vacation or sick time. We get to reap the benefits of their years of experience without bankrupting our district.

When it comes to finding teachers for math and sciences, Guy Leavitt, the CESA #4 Administrator, told me that it is often very hard to find qualified people when the district is only able to afford a half-time position. This drives many young teachers still struggling with their college debt to seek out higher paying jobs. A retired teacher who does not have to worry about that debt could be a real lifesaver in one of these situations.

This rehiring also helps school districts hire itinerant staff, specialized part-time instructors that serve multiple schools. Requiring a teacher to travel across a school district or even a CESA district while only paying them half-time limits the number of applicants for these positions. Recent retirees can help fill these jobs so that children who need a little extra help get the quality care they deserve.

These retirees are helping our school districts get by in very difficult situations. Without them as a resource that school boards can turn to in a crisis, Mr. Leavitt warned things could go from bad to worse.

Now back to the budget. In his proposal, the Governor recommended that the break-in-service requirement be expanded to 75 days instead of 30. The proposal also requires that you lose your pension if you go back to work as a public employee where you are expected to work at least two-thirds (1,392 hours) of what the ETF (Department of Employee Trust Funds) considers to be full-time.



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If the budget bill is signed into law with these new requirements for hiring annuitants, we are putting our school districts in a difficult position. If rehired teachers are forced to choose between working part-time or collecting benefits, our schools will lose out on yet another group of qualified employees who simply cannot afford to live off of the available salary.

This requirement on rehiring state retirees is a one-size fits all solution that does not take into account the variety of situations and circumstances that brings a public employee back to work. This issue is broader than rehiring a retired teacher; this is about small towns that cannot afford to hire police chiefs and fire chiefs and rely on retirees to help them protect their citizens. This is about Universities like UW L balancing their budget by hiring part-time employees. I agree with those who say we should work to prevent fraud to ensure that our hard working public employees' retirement funds remain solvent, but limiting the options available to our schools and small towns is not the way. Double-dipping is bad with chips, but when it comes to hiring educators for our children, an experienced and qualified teacher may be just the inspiration they need to thrive.